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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003522

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/01/2018

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND FM SOMPONG DISCUSS CHOICES FACING
PM SOMCHAI

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (S) Summary: Ambassador engaged FM Sompong Amornvivat December 1 on the ongoing political crisis and the choices facing PM Somchai Wongsawat. Sompong said that there would be informal discussions on the margins of a December 2 Cabinet meeting to be held in Chiang Mai about whether Somchai should resign and call new elections, even before an expected Constitutional Court decision disbands the ruling People's Power Party (PPP) and forces PM Somchai to step down. Sompong asked Ambassador for advice on the way forward; Ambassador counseled that the government needed to ensure law and order, and the ruling party probably only had one shot to use a resignation or court decision to convince the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to end its occupation of Bangkok's airports peacefully. Sompong shared Ambassador's doubts about how much various members of the monarchy truly supported the PAD, as claimed by both the PAD and the "red" pro-government forces. In a follow-on meeting, Ambassador raised U.S. concerns with the lack of law and order in connection to both the current airport standoff and a worrisome investment development on the Eastern Seaboard with MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrakul. End Summary.

What comes next: Cabinet meeting, parade

12. (C) In the presence of MFA and embassy notetakers, FM Sompong told Ambassador that he would fly to Chiang Mai later December 1 for the Cabinet meeting December 2 at 0900. The Cabinet, including PM Somchai, would then return to Bangkok in order to attend the King's Birthday parade the evening of December 2. Sompong said he would convey the concerns of the private sector, particularly the need for law and order, to PM Somchai late on December 1. Somchai faced a decision on what to do next, in particular whether he should resign and dissolve parliament, as Army GEN Anupong had suggested. The pressure to make a decision was increasing, Sompong asserted. The longer the current situation drew out, the worse it was for the government and country. FM Sompong thanked Ambassador for the constructive U.S. statement issued November 28.

Way Forward: Sompong asks for advice; Somchai unsure

13. (S) In an extended one-on-one session, FM Sompong brought the Ambassador to his private office and asked him for friendly advice on the way forward, recognizing that the

Constitutional Court would likely soon rule against the PPP. Ambassador acknowledged that a forceful removal of the PAD from the airports would be counterproductive, but stressed that the government needed to ensure law and order and be prepared to defend other infrastructure. In terms of the political dynamics, Ambassador noted neither side was blameless in the current standoff. The PAD's transgressions were clear, but the government had not done itself any favors by attempting to ram through constitutional changes without meaningful discussion, more specifically amendments designed to assist those accused of crimes. Just because the coalition had won a majority in the election did not mean it should completely ignore the minority's views. Sompong said he agreed.

14. (S) PM Somchai was unsure what to do next, FM Sompong continued. Somchai might have a soft image, but he was resilient, and did not want to give up. However, Sompong planned to suggest to Somchai that he consider resigning and calling new elections. Sompong had met with the private sector earlier December 1. The business community had two messages: the government must ensure law and order; and if it could not, Somchai should resign. Somchai was torn between resigning and staying on. Ambassador noted that the Court decision might force the issue imminently any way; Sompong agreed that was probably true.

15. (S) Ambassador noted that the ruling party really had only one shot to resolve the impasse with the PAD peacefully, in the aftermath of the upcoming court decision. Handled correctly, the PAD might be induced to walk out peacefully

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from the airports. The alternative--bloodshed, an extended inability to access Bangkok's airports, and a ripple effect of violence with impunity elsewhere in Thailand--would be disastrous for the country. The government needed to find someone who could speak to the PAD, perhaps Privy Council Chair Prem, to get them to vacate the airports were the government to resign. Broadening representation in the next government, even if the opposition Democrat Party were not formally a part of a coalition, would show a change in government would not just be another opportunity for the pro-Thaksin force to keep the current constellation locked in. Sompong said part of the problem was that the PAD insisted it would only negotiate with Somchai.

Role of the Queen/monarchy with PAD overblown?

16. (S) FM Sompong asked Ambassador what he thought of the PAD's claim to have royal support, particularly from the Queen. Ambassador expressed doubt, suggesting that both the PAD and the pro-government red forces exaggerated the connection for their own purposes and messaging to their respective bases. King Bhumibol appeared neutral and above the fray; Crown Princess Sirindhorn had clearly expressed her views while in the U.S. in early October that the PAD was acting for itself, not on behalf of the monarchy. Sompong expressed agreement; he did not see the alleged solid connection either.

Raising concerns with PermSec Virasakdi

17. (C) Ambassador met MFA Permsec Virasakdi Futrakul after the Sompong meeting concluded. Ambassador expressed appreciation for the military's reassurances that there would be no coup. The U.S. understood the government's approach to resolving the airport sieges without resort to force, since that could lead to bloodshed and damage to the airports that could keep them inoperable for an extended time. The PAD action had created a serious situation for stranded Amcit travelers; the Embassy might need MFA assistance in securing extra slots at Utapao if Northwest and United added additional flights. Virasak replied that Thai authorities

were planning on opening up the Khorat air field to charter flights.

18. (C) Ambassador raised concerns that Thai authorities, particularly law enforcement personnel, seemed ill prepared for any additional PAD action targeting critical infrastructures. The PAD had signaled its intent to take over the airports days prior to initiating action. Their threats to blockade ports and cut utilities like electricity and telecoms should be taken seriously, but there seemed to be no contingency planning. Ambassador urged the RTG to examine ways of protecting facilities rather than waiting until the PAD's next move. Virasak said he would pass the message to appropriate ministries but noted that sympathetic state-owned enterprise workers could do damage to infrastructure from the inside, obviating the need for PAD demonstrators.

19. (C) Ambassador raised the separate concern of an industrial action at the Ford plant in Rayong. Plant employees dissatisfied with negotiations seemingly took a page out of the PAD playbook, blockading the factory November 27, locking in 1000 employees, and damaging some equipment. When Ford management asked the police to intervene, the police refused, suggesting management work out the problems internally. This was an unacceptable and worrisome development, the Ambassador stressed, with implications for other businesses along the Eastern Seaboard and Thailand's investment climate reputation. The U.S. understood the current political crisis dominated Thai official attention, but we wanted to be able to maintain the close U.S. relationship with Thailand, not only the long-standing alliance but also our productive trade and investment relationship. Virasak promised to pass the message of concern to the Ministry of Industry.

JOHN